

The Girl, a Horse and a Dog

By FRANCIS LYNDE

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CHAPTER XVI.—Continued

Now the presence of a wagon on our bench at this early hour in the morning might mean either one of two diametrically opposite things: Our deliverance; or the upcoming of reinforcements for the raiders. We were not left long in doubt. Shortly after the rack-rack of the wagon wheels stopped we heard footsteps, and the half stiffened on Barney's back. Next we heard Bullerton's voice, just outside and apparently under our window openings.

"Broughton!" the voice called; "can you hear me?"

"So well that you'd better keep out of range!" I snapped back.

"All right—listen. You've got to get out, Broughton—that's flat. I haven't wanted to go to extremes. For perfectly obvious and commonplace reasons I don't want to have to kill you to get rid of you. But we are not going to gentle you any more. You've already hurt four of my men, and two of the four are crippled. The next time we hit you, I'll be for a finish."

"Yes," said I. "You brought the new club up in a wagon, didn't you?"

He ignored this.

"We could starve you out if we chose to take the time. I know pretty well what you've got to eat—or rather what you haven't got. It's your privilege to take your life in your own hands, Broughton; that's up to you. But how about the old man?"

"The old man's a plenty good and able to speak for himself!" yapped Daddy. "You do your damndest, Charley Bullerton."

"All right, once more. You'll hear from us directly, now; and as I said before, we've quit gentling you. That's my last word."

For a time after this the silence, and the darkness, since it was the hour before dawn, were thick enough to be cut with an ax. But the dog was more restless than ever, and we knew that something we could neither see nor hear must be going on. After a while I asked the question that had been worrying me ever since I had heard the wagon wheels.

"What did they bring up in that wagon, Daddy, Godling?"

"The Lord only knows, Stannie—and he won't tell," was the old prospector's reply, made with no touch of irreverence; and the words were scarcely out of his mouth before a thunderbolt struck the shaft-house.

CHAPTER XVII.

Tit for Tat.

That word "thunderbolt" is hardly a figure of speech. The thing that hit us couldn't be compared to anything milder than thunder and lightning. There was a flash, a rending, ripping roar as if the solid earth were splitting in two, and the air was filled with flying fragments and splinters. Air, I say, but the acid, choking gas which filled the shaft-house could scarcely be called air.

"Dynamite—that's what they fetched in that wagon!" gurgled the old man at my side, and I could have shouted for joy at the mere sound of his voice, since it was an assurance that he hadn't been killed outright.

"It's only a question of a little time, now, Daddy," I prophesied. "What you said yesterday—that Bullerton would try to get possession without destroying the property—no longer holds good. He has evidently decided that we've got to be ousted, even at the expense of building a new shaft-house and installing new machinery. Why has he changed his mind, when he knows that he could starve us out in a few days?"

"I been thinkin' about that, right p'intedly, Stannie. Shouldn't wonder if somethin' in the wind—somethin' we don't know about."

"Then there's another thing," I put in. "Supposing, just for the sake of argument, that our first guess was right; that he did take Jeanie to Angels three days ago and that they were married there. You know your daughter, Daddy, and I know her, a little. Nobody but an idiot would suppose that she'd live with Bullerton as his wife for a single minute if he makes himself your murderer."

"It sure does look that-away to a man up a tree," admitted the stout old fighter.

"I'm hanging on to the little hope like a dog to a root, Daddy," I confessed. "If I can only keep on believing that they're not married, I can put up a better fight, or be snuffed out—if I have to be—with a good few less heart-burnings."

But at this the old man, who, no longer ago than the yesterday, had seemed to lean definitely toward the no-marriage hypothesis, suddenly changed front.

"Don't you go to bankin' on anything like that, Stannie, son," he said in a tone of deep discouragement. "Charley Bullerton's a liar, from the place where they make liars for a livin', and 'tain't goin' to be no trick at-all for him to make Jeanie, and a lot of other folks, believe that we blowed ourselves up with our own dynamite. No, sir; don't you go to bankin' on that."

"Then you do believe that Jeanie went with Bullerton?"

"Looks like there ain't nothing else left to believe," he asserted solemnly. "Look at it for yourself, son; she's been gone three whole days. If she hadn't gone with him—and the good Lord only knows where else she could have gone—don't you reckon she'd've been back here long afore this? No, Stannie, we been lettin' the 'wish it was' run away with the 'hand us to be.' I reckon we just got to grit our teeth, son, and tough it out the best we can."

During this waiting interval, which

seemed like hours and was probably only a few minutes, we were momentarily expecting another crash. It did not come; but in due course of time we heard a stir outside and then voices, and one of the voices, which was not Bullerton's, said: "I'll bet that cin'ridge smoked 'em out good an' plenty, cap'n. Gimme th' ax, Tom, till we bust open the door an' have a squint at 'em."

Just at that moment a submerging wave of depression surged over me and shoved me down so deep that I think possibly if Bullerton had called out and demanded our surrender I should have been tempted to tell him that I was not so much of a hog as not to know when I had enough. But the old man squeezed in beside me under the arched boiler plate was made of better fiber; he was game to the last hair in his head. With a wild Indian yell, he hunched his Winchester into position and fired once, twice, thrice, at the door, as rapidly as he could pump the reloading lever.

A spattering fusillade was the reply to this, but the aim was bad and the only result was to set the air of our prison fortress to buzzing as if a swarm of angry bees had been turned loose on us. After this, the raiders withdrew, so we judged; at all events, the silence of the dark hour before daybreak shut down upon us again, and once more we had space in which to "gather our minds," as Daddy put it.

It may be a dastardly confession of weakness to admit it, but I am free to say that the prolonged struggle was gradually undermining my nerve. If Bullerton had made up his mind to write off the loss of the mine buildings and machinery, it was a battle lost for us. It could be only a question of a little time, and enough daylight to enable the bombers to throw straight, until we should be buried in the wreck of the shaft-house and hoist—and without the privilege of dying in a good, old-fashioned, stand-up fight.

All of this I hastily pointed out to Daddy Hiram, adding that, for Jeanie's sake, if for no better reason, he ought to take his chance of staying upon earth. As long as I live I shall always have a high respect for the wrath of a mild-mannered man. The old prospector was fairly Berserk, mad, foaming at the mouth, and short of dragging him out by main strength there was no way of making him let go.

"No, sir; I done promised your gran'paw I'd stand by for him, and he paid me money for doin' it. When them hellions get this here mine, they're goin' to dig a hole somewheres and bury me afterward," was all I could get out of him.

We were not given very much more time for discussion, or for anything else. The first faint gray dawn was coming, and with the partial lighting of the inner gloom, we craned our necks—like a double-headed turtle peering out of its shell—and got a glimpse of the damage done by the initial thunderbolt. We saw it without any trouble; a great hole torn in the sheeting roof directly over the hoist and shaft mouth. Knowing the use and effect of explosives pretty well, Daddy said that the bomb had gone off prematurely; had exploded before it had fairly lighted upon the roof.

"If it hadn't—if it had been layin' on the roof when it went off—we wouldn't be lookin' up at that hole now."

"That there's old Ike Beasley—dad-blame his old hide!" he chattered. "There ain't nary 'nother man in the Timanyons' 'at can cuss like that. He's come with a posse, and they're layin' out Charley Bullerton's crowd!"

There was a fine little tableau spreading itself out for us when we had clambered over the wreckage and had withdrawn the wooden bar and flung the door wide. Daddy Hiram had called the turn and named the trump. The large, desperadoish-looking

man who had once interviewed me at Angels, and a little later had paused in his combing of the mountain in search of me to usurp my place at the Twanahy's breakfast table, this bewhiskered giant, with a goodish bunch of followers—hard-boiled to a man, they looked to be—had surrounded a fair half of the would-be "jumpers" and were handcuffing them with a celerity that was truly admirable. And Beasley, himself, square-jawed and peremptory, was shoving Bullerton up against the side of the shaft-house, snapping the irons upon his wrists and counseling him, with choice epithets intermingled, to save up his troubles and tell them to the judge.

As we emerged from our wrecked fortress, other members of the posse were scattering to round up the outlying bomb-throwers, who had apparently taken to the tall timber in a panic-stricken effort to escape. Down on the bench below there were horses and horse-holders; and among the horses one whose boyish-looking rider was just slipping from the saddle. While I was wondering vaguely why the Angels town marshal had let him and so later in a thunderous rain; and then.

For a flitting instant it seemed as if it must drop squarely in front of the iron shield under which we were jammed—in which case even the undertaker wouldn't have been needed—not any whatsoever, as Daddy Hiram would have said. But at the critical point in its flight the hurtling thing "ticked" the top of the hoist frame and its downward course was deflected the needed half-breadth, causing it to come down beyond the machinery, and not on our side of things.

Nevertheless, we were covering in anticipation of a blast which would most likely leave the entire machinery aggregation over bodily upon us when the explosion came.

We saw the belching column of flame and gas going skyward beyond the machinery barrier, taking a full half of the roof with it, as if the blast had come from the mouth of a gigantic cannon. We were dazed and deafened by the shock, and half choked by the fumes, but neither of us was so far gone as not to hear distinctly a prolonged and rumbling crash like the thunder of a small Niagara, coming after the smash.

"The shaft!" shrieked Daddy Hiram, in a thin, choked voice; "It went off down in the shaft! And, say!—what-all's that we're a-listenin' to now!"

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There was a fine little tableau spreading itself out for us when we had clambered over the wreckage and had withdrawn the wooden bar and flung the door wide. Daddy Hiram had called the turn and named the trump. The large, desperadoish-looking

man who had once interviewed me at Angels, and a little later had paused in his combing of the mountain in search of me to usurp my place at the Twanahy's breakfast table, this bewhiskered giant, with a goodish bunch of followers—hard-boiled to a man, they looked to be—had surrounded a fair half of the would-be "jumpers" and were handcuffing them with a celerity that was truly admirable. And Beasley, himself, square-jawed and peremptory, was shoving Bullerton up against the side of the shaft-house, snapping the irons upon his wrists and counseling him, with choice epithets intermingled, to save up his troubles and tell them to the judge.

As we emerged from our wrecked fortress, other members of the posse were scattering to round up the outlying bomb-throwers, who had apparently taken to the tall timber in a panic-stricken effort to escape. Down on the bench below there were horses and horse-holders; and among the horses one whose boyish-looking rider was just slipping from the saddle. While I was wondering vaguely why the Angels town marshal had let him and so later in a thunderous rain; and then.

For a flitting instant it seemed as if it must drop squarely in front of the iron shield under which we were jammed—in which case even the undertaker wouldn't have been needed—not any whatsoever, as Daddy Hiram would have said. But at the critical point in its flight the hurtling thing "ticked" the top of the hoist frame and its downward course was deflected the needed half-breadth, causing it to come down beyond the machinery, and not on our side of things.

Nevertheless, we were covering in anticipation of a blast which would most likely leave the entire machinery aggregation over bodily upon us when the explosion came.

We saw the belching column of flame and gas going skyward beyond the machinery barrier, taking a full half of the roof with it, as if the blast had come from the mouth of a gigantic cannon. We were dazed and deafened by the shock, and half choked by the fumes, but neither of us was so far gone as not to hear distinctly a prolonged and rumbling crash like the thunder of a small Niagara, coming after the smash.

"The shaft!" shrieked Daddy Hiram, in a thin, choked voice; "It went off down in the shaft! And, say!—what-all's that we're a-listenin' to now!"

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